

Monumental Pride: Sino-Vietnamese Cross-border Commemorations of Nùng Trí Cao

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Article:

Nowhere else is the 11th-century rebel Nùng Trí Cao (Hong Zhigao 儂智高) (1025? -1055?) more revered than in his own home region within Tai-speaking communities along the modern border between China's Guangxi Autonomous Region and Viet Nam's Cao Bằng Province. The present source of regional pride in Trí Cao may be found in tales of his three ambitious but unsuccessful attempts to establish a Sino-Vietnamese frontier kingdom in 1042, 1048 and 1052. Throughout the imperial period, both Chinese and Vietnamese court historians labeled Nùng Trí Cao a troublemaker. His public image was not rehabilitated until Marxist regimes took power in these countries. Nùng Trí Cao is now remembered officially on both sides of the border as a "hero of the people", although the identity of "the people" remains unclear.

However, public sites for the veneration of this local hero are not evenly distributed across the border. While few such sites are now located in southern China, northern Viet Nam supports numerous locations to celebrate the deeds of Nùng Trí Cao, his father Nùng Tôn Phúc 儂存福 and his mother A Nùng. In Cao Bằng province annual festivals have long been observed to honor these figures. Five temples dedicated to the worship of Nùng Trí Cao stayed active well into the twentieth century, and two of these temples survived French colonial administration, guerrilla warfare and police action to remain in use even today. These extant temples include the Ký Sâm Temple on the outskirts of the city of Cao Bằng and a temple in Quảng Nguyên commune, long considered the home region of Nùng Trí Cao. Moreover, a temple located in Ha Quảng County's Sóc Hà commune remained active until its destruction during the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border conflict. The Nã Lu Temple on the banks of the Bằng River several kilometers upstream from Cao Bằng was reportedly erected on the site of Nùng Tôn Phúc's former citadel. A small makeshift temple dedicated to A Nùng still stands in the western Cao Bang suburbs.

The modern-day veneration of Nùng Trí Cao and his parents in Cao Bang province is closely tied to the shared regional identity of people from this region. Trí Cao remains a hero and a "man of prowess," and worship includes practices that highlight the particular strengths of Trí Cao, including his willingness to face up to the aggression of both Song and Dai Việt authorities and his ambition to unify and heighten the status of his region's people. From the historical record, one can also see that, by the late 19th century, annual festivals devoted to the spirit of Nùng Trí Cao were regionally important. It is equally apparent that the appeal of these Vietnamese festivals extended beyond clan or ethnic affiliations to the general populace that has often included communities on both sides of the modern political border.

In stark contrast to the wealth of evidence for worship activity in northern Viet Nam, there is little confirmation in the Chinese historical record of the existence of temple sites dedicated to Trí Cao in China. In fact, most relevant Chinese sources only describe stelae and temples that honor the names of the Song generals who crushed Trí Cao's bid for independence. Only in the last few years has the issue of a public memorial to Nùng Trí Cao in China been addressed. On January 8th, 1997 a local group of Trí Cao's descendants and their

supporters from the Guangxi township of Jingxi 靖西 and the tiny village of Xia Lei 下雷 took the initiative to revive interest in this rebel's life and deeds. The vice-director of the Center for Zhuang Studies in Nanning, Pan Qixu 潘其旭 had earlier been invited to Xia Lei to authenticate the discovery of the cave believed to be Nùng Trí Cao's dwelling and storehouse at the time he founded his first kingdom. A modern stele was then erected on this site. A large group of provincial officials and leading academics from Guangxi reportedly attended the commemoration ceremony.

This ceremony did generate some controversy. Funds for this stele had to be raised privately. Organizers of this event later told me that high-level political figures have avoided involvement in the project, voicing concerns over its "separatist" implications. Nevertheless, the goal of bringing Nùng Trí Cao back into the public eye was largely successful, as the long list of small donors to the stele installation suggested. A glance at the large donors list, however, reveals that 32 out of the 34 persons included had the surname Nong. This fact suggests that although distant Han officials fear that the memorial could be used to fan regional "Pan- Tai" sentiments, older clan associations may shape local identification with this site.

Local disputes aside, this recent Guangxi memorial and the continuing regional popularity of the temples in Viet Nam are signs that the region has recovered from the "dark days" of the 1980's when the Sino-Vietnamese border remained tense and frosty diplomatic relations curbed official cross-border activities. Communities that honor Trí Cao still span a region that contains many historical sites of bloody confrontation between Chinese and Vietnamese armies. However, these communities share a common thread of identity, preserved in part by a devotion to the figure of Nùng Trí Cao. Their reverence for this 11th-century rebel leader is a sentiment that transcends modern political demarcation.